

Work and Social Stability in Pre-Revolutionary Massachusetts

Eric G. Nellis

Volume 16, Number 1, 1981

Halifax 1981

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/030869ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/030869ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0068-8878 (print)

1712-9109 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Nellis, E. G. (1981). Work and Social Stability in Pre-Revolutionary Massachusetts. *Historical Papers / Communications historiques*, 16(1), 81–100.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/030869ar>

Article abstract

L'historiographie concernant la Nouvelle-Angleterre pré-révolutionnaire s'est beaucoup enrichie ces dernières années et, de même, la perception que l'on se faisait de la société d'alors a également considérablement changé. Ainsi, bien qu'auparavant l'on ait considéré la société de la Nouvelle-Angleterre comme étant relativement stable et peu changeante, de nos jours, il est beaucoup plus à la mode de prôner le contraire. Aussi, affirme-t-on volontiers que les changements qu'elle a connus ont été si rapides que les conditions socio-économiques et culturelles s'en sont trouvées tout à fait bouleversées.

L'auteur se propose ici de modifier sensiblement la sévérité de ce jugement. Selon lui, l'étude du travail-élément qui est véritablement central dans la vie de la société du Massachusetts pré-révolutionnaire démontre que celui-ci n'a pas subi les changements que certains ont observés dans d'autres facteurs sociaux. Par conséquent, il suggère que le vécu de la société d'alors a probablement été marqué par beaucoup plus de cohésion et de continuité que ne veulent l'admettre ceux qui pratiquent la nouvelle histoire sociale.

Work and Social Stability in Pre-Revolutionary Massachusetts

ERIC G. NELLIS

The study of the social history of eighteenth-century New England has been enriched by recent and sophisticated application of intellectually rigorous, multi-disciplinary, social history techniques. While the "new social history" increases our knowledge and understanding of colonial and Revolution-era society, it has shown a tendency to hasten the processes of change in that society. It has done so in the historical context of the transition from a "pastoral-traditional" or "pre-modern" culture to a "commercial-capitalist" or "modern" socio-economic condition. The "puritan to yankee" theme is a variant of that transition. Because the rate of transition is frequently shown as occurring rapidly, the nature of the changes is often described as disruptive, as being responsible for a break in the social continuum of the local colonial communities.¹ This essay will challenge that interpretation first by reviewing the historiographical framework and then by offering an alternative approach to the question of social change and stability.

According to an earlier historiography, pre-Revolutionary New England was politically and intellectually "undistinguished ... rude and drab in its insularity." It was thought also to be socially harmonious and economically pre-modern, growing but changing only slowly and slightly.² Today, this picture of insular stability has been thoroughly revised. By now it has become something of an historiographical orthodoxy to describe late colonial New England—and especially eastern Massachusetts and Boston, after 1720—as an unstable society. The maturing of the new social history has brought with it a substantial reinterpretation of the social and economic structure of colonial America's most homogeneous region. Many social historians now endorse the notion of accelerated change in that society, and translate the change into socio-economic and cultural "dysfunction."³ Moreover,

1. Richard Dunn, "The Social History of Early New England", *American Quarterly*, 24 (1972), pp. 422-43; Richard Beeman, "The New Social History and the Search for 'Community' in Colonial America", *American Quarterly*, 29 (1977), pp. 661-79. Eric G. Nellis, "Social History, Local Studies and the Institutions of Early America", *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 9 (1980), pp. 327-45.
2. The quote is from Vernon Parrington, *The Colonial Mind*, volume I of *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York, 1927), p. 133. See also Evarts Boutell Greene, *Provincial America, 1690-1740* (New York, 1905); James Truslow Adams, *Provincial Society, 1690-1763* (New York, 1927).
3. Stanley Katz, in Katz, ed., *Colonial America: Essays in Political and Social Development*, second edition, (Boston, 1976), pp. 490-1.

the new social history has become so self-assured and persuasive that the older school of provincial historiography is made to seem incomplete, naive, and sentimental. Even recent studies which assign too much stability to the region, in the generation or so prior to the Revolution, are treated with caution by social historians. Jackson Turner Main's "ramp" of slow but steady upward mobility among farmers and artisans—occurring as late as the 1770s—has been faulted for being too "static" in its measurement technique, and for not noting enough signs of conflict.⁴

The older literature produced an idealized composite personality: a self-sufficient but cooperative yeoman or artisan, who was secure and parochial. The stereotype of the prosperous New England merchant took on some of the qualities of the equable and civic-minded Samuel Sewall. All this has been revalued, of course. The demythologizing of a long-cherished American symbol has been achieved, at least among historians schooled in the science of social conflict. Crèvecoeur's eighteenth-century "new man" is made to seem cynical in a society disjointed by liberalism; a society in the throes of early modernism, replete with a developing market mentality. It has been argued that there were social divisions along economic class lines, including the enlargement of a propertyless "peasant" stratum.⁵ This historiographical revolution has been conducted with remarkable swiftness. As recently as 1958, the Bancroft Prize could go to a work that in part celebrated the pure and simple equality of the colonial farmer in his pastoral setting, and described a contented and thriving town artisan as a town burgher, with little consideration of social or economic pluralism. By 1977, the Bancroft Prize went to a monograph which synthesized the new social history in a single case study and produced a picture of late provincial Massachusetts as fragmented, class-ridden, factious, and socially and politically unstable.⁶ In this latter study, the farmers of Concord joined Committees of Correspondence and became radical rebels—"minutemen"—not only because their political rights were threatened by British intrusions, but also because they were dissatisfied with their imperfect lives in a society that no longer provided the traditional socio-economic conditions and expectations. Similarly, historians now explain the motives of the Boston "mob" when it vandalized Hutchinson's home in 1765, or analyze its behaviour in provoking the Boston Massacre, by referring to that "mob" as an urban "proletariat."⁷

4. Jackson Turner Main, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton, 1965); Kenneth Lockridge, "Land, Population and the Evolution of New England Society", in Katz, ed., *Colonial America*, first edition, (Boston, 1971), pp. 467-8.

5. Lockridge, "Social Change and the Meaning of the American Revolution", in Katz, ed., *Colonial America*, second edition, pp. 490-520; Katz says "the effect was to 'modernize' American society in much the same way ... as contemporary societies in the Third World have been modernized." *Ibid.*, p. 491.

6. Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York, 1958); Robert Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World...* (New York, 1976).

7. This unfortunate term, along with "lumpenproletariat", was used by James Henretta in *The Evolution of American Society, 1700-1815* (Lexington, 1973), p. 97.

Thus, many of today's social historians of colonial New England are social *crisis* historians. It has been suggested, for example, that in rural eastern Massachusetts the pressures of a growing population on limited land resources was creating an unprecedented landless "labouring class" by 1760. This group would be dragged into the Revolution as an exploited and embittered plurality eager to right the wrongs of an inequitable *local* society. In Boston, economic stagnation and concentrations of wealth and poverty have been cited as evidence of declining standards in community cohesion and stability.⁸ Certainly, in the case of Boston, abundant social and economic evidence can be mustered to show what appears to be a degree of social change that can be characterized as "modern."⁹ Economic retrenchment apparently left in its wake a troubled and more stratified community. The institutional rationalization of poverty, as a measure of the failure of traditional means of social order, can indeed be traced from John Oliver's Spinning School Orphanage in 1730 to the expansion of the Alms House and the construction of a new Workhouse (for "productive charity") in 1738 down to the ill-fated linen Manufacturing Scheme (again, for commercial "productive charity") in the 1750s and 1760s. On the face of it, developments such as these, and the evidence from rural deed records and Boston's tax records, of a growing economic disparity in the population lend credence to a gloomy picture of so-called "multiple dysfunction" in late colonial Massachusetts society.¹⁰ The concluding equation of the new social history is that the changed demographic, economic, social, and cultural variables of late provincial Massachusetts society were combining to shatter a formerly simple and balanced social order.

It is the purpose of the present paper to attempt to moderate the severity of that equation. By analyzing what people in this society *did* rather than what they had, it can be demonstrated that the transition from a pastoral and traditional society to a modern one was slower and more gradual than some historians have argued. One useful means of observing the behaviour of members of that society is to describe their various social and economic relationships through the medium of work. By introducing *work* as a social variable that was at once central to the social modes of pre-Revolutionary Massachusetts and yet was not subject to the kinds of change predicated by other social factors, it is suggested here that there was substantial social cohesion and continuity in this society.

-
8. Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), esp. pp. 161-97. Marc Egnal, "The Economic Development of the Thirteen Continental Colonies, 1720-1775", *William and Mary Quarterly* (hereafter *WMQ*), 32 (1975), pp. 191-222; James Henretta, "Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston", *WMQ*, 22 (1965), pp. 75-92.
 9. Lockridge, "Social Change". See also Michael Kammen's use of the term "unstable pluralism" in *People of Paradox* (New York, 1972).
 10. Such is the syncretic picture presented by Henretta, *Evolution*. The term "multiple dysfunction" is used by C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford, 1962) in describing the transition from "simple" market to "possessive" market economies.

There is no doubt that in any socio-anthropological theory of the patterns of social organization, work in its purpose, design, and performance is considered as a principal variable in the sociological makeup of all human societies. In intimate or discrete settings, from hunters and gatherers to primitive and advanced agrarianism, and from industrial to technological societies, work has occurred in direct conjunction with all other social variables.¹¹ It should be difficult to separate work as an independent variable, yet in historical study quite often its place and function in a given social setting is either ignored or superficially assumed and dismissed as a secondary concern. But work both contributes to and reflects the complete profile of any social aggregation. Thus it is remarkable that our present generation of colonial and Revolutionary *social* historians, trained as they are in multi- and inter-disciplinary social science concepts, usually fail to give work a more meaningful place in their various reconstructions of early American society. This suggested omission is not total, of course, but work, or "labour," is too often given significance only as it bears upon poverty, or the politicized artisan, or the lower class mob. Otherwise, work in colonial society is viewed incorrectly in the monolithic context of "labour history," with the appropriate political and cultural concerns of that branch of historiography.¹²

Because most of the questions historians ask of the past are derivative, it is not surprising that the connection between work and colonial society is often based on the stimulus provided by such labour historians as Commons, Jernegan, Smith, and Morris. Thus the "model" for work is often derived from a "labour history" concept rather than from social theory. Richard Morris' seminal work, for all its exhaustive apparatus and bulk, made only two significant points: first, that labour in early America fell into two categories—free and bonded, and second, that even free labour was subject to systematic legal and legislative control, at least until after the Revolution.¹³ This narrow interpretation of labour was nothing more than a restatement of the labour historian's view of work relationships as an independent social or political variable. In this, as it is applied to colonial America, there is more than a little of the modernist theory of "labour" as defining a socio-political class or distinctive plurality. The problem with this model is that it fails to recognize the integrated and balanced socio-economic character of pre-industrial New England society. Therefore, the present discussion rejects the labour history model and will concentrate on work as a social activity. It is of some note that civil, ecclesiastical, and political considerations can be merged to produce a body of useful institutional history. But, while the debate rages on regarding the precise

11. The historical perspective is well stated by Karl Polanyi in *The Great Transformation* (London, 1944); this consideration was also Adam Smith's starting point in *The Wealth of Nations*.

12. See Richard B. Morris, "American Labor History Prior to the Civil War: Sources and Opportunities for Research", *Labor History*, 1 (1960), pp. 308-18. On the terms "labour" and "work", see the useful brief etymology in R. Williams, *Keywords* (Glasgow, 1976).

13. Richard Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America* (New York, 1946). See also Marcus Jernegan, *Laboring and Dependent Classes in Colonial America* (Chicago, 1931).

WORK AND SOCIAL STABILITY IN MASSACHUSETTS

nature of late provincial society, one still awaits a body of literature from the new social history that can be examined fully as a "history of society."

In the case of work, as a missing element in this regeneration of local, regional, and social history, it might be worthwhile considering some "older" approaches as a way of broadening the themes of social history. Along with the modular and theoretical questions historians bring to the new social history, questions dealing with concepts of "family" or "community" or "economic exchange," or "behavioral norms" for example, a more empirical consideration should be given to *how* people lived in that society. A satisfactory example of this approach is Lewis Gray's useful and compendious *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States* (two volumes, Washington, 1933). Gray's work is as much a study of working conditions as it is analysis of the social and economic dynamics of an agrarian culture. Percy Bidwell, in what must be considered a northern companion piece to Gray's thesis, had the good sense to describe the supreme importance of the New England farmers' varied work regime *before* he made his still-pertinent assessment of the special qualities of that colonial agricultural society.¹⁴ Bidwell's fine insight was that the overall nature of the New England economy and the patterns of settlement and community life affected the *style* of work—how and why it was organized and performed—and that work patterns in turn helped shape and sustain the social, economic, and cultural equilibrium. By borrowing from Bidwell's "reciprocal" approach and reviewing work and society in late colonial rural Massachusetts, a slightly different picture emerges from that which is prevalent in most recent social histories.

The working life of the subsistence farmer is one of the least understood or acknowledged features of the sociology of colonial Massachusetts. In terms of some sociological definitions, it should be said that the notion of equating rudimentary agricultural subsistence with "peasantry" is not acceptable in the context of provincial rural Massachusetts. The patterns and terms of land holding and ownership, on a family scale, make the distinction between "independent farmer" and "peasant" quite pronounced in the Massachusetts environment; the former is certainly the proper definition.¹⁵ It can be shown that as late as 1771 as many as 80 per cent of rural Massachusetts families lived on and worked land to which they had title. Even in the older and more heavily populated towns of eastern Massachusetts, this figure seldom fell below 65 per cent.¹⁶ Whether or not these figures were lower than they had been a half-century earlier is not altogether

14. Percy Bidwell and John Falconer, *History of Agriculture in the Northern United States 1620-1860* (Washington, 1925). There are elements of this approach, as it applies to Pennsylvania, in James T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country*....

15. Lockridge ("Land, Population" and "Social Change") relies on the taxonomy and examples of the social anthropologist, Eric Wolf. The latter's definitions are drawn largely from contemporary "Third World" settings. See his discussion of "farming", "labour", "peasant", and "market" in *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1969), pp. ix-xv.

16. Public Archives of Massachusetts (hereafter MA) MSS, vols. 130-4, "Valuations of Towns".

clear. Certainly if the percentages *were* declining in some areas, they can be shown to be stable in others.

In some towns the adult male to land-holding ratio had increased and there were indeed growing percentages of landless labourers. No generalization of any value can be drawn from that information. If, for example, it can be shown that a lower percentage of resident adult males farmed titled land in Dedham or Andover in 1771 than did in 1721, it can also be shown that in the nearby town of Roxbury, the figure had remained nearly constant.¹⁷ One explanation of this, in light of the pressure of a rapid and large population increase, is that, while the size of individual holdings shrunk across all of eastern Massachusetts, the size of *cultivated* farms remained the same: that is, the amount of acreage that could be managed by the total labour output and still supply the subsistence needs of an individual nuclear family. That manageable amount of cultivated acreage was less than twenty acres on average,¹⁸ so that the great underused and unused personalized land grants of the mid- to late-seventeenth century were still being subdivided into *farm lots* for third and fourth generation progeny as late as the last third of the eighteenth century.¹⁹

The principle of smaller inheritances of land and the increased out-migration of excess working-age population (often cited as a "sign" of social breakdown) help explain the fact that the per capita ratios of farmers and acres of cultivated land was virtually unchanged from 1751 to 1801.²⁰ That is a very crucial consideration, because the most meaningful influence of subsistence farming on work habits derives from the predominance and persistence of the economic limitations of the family farm. The average farm household size in rural Massachusetts, in the mid- to late-eighteenth century, was 7.6 persons.²¹ This figure remained constant for

-
17. Massachusetts Historical Society (hereafter MHS) MSS, "Roxbury Valuations of 1727"; MA MSS, vol. 134; Philip Greven, *Four Generations, Population, Land and Family in Colonial Andover* (Ithaca, 1970) and Kenneth Lockridge, *A New England Town ... Dedham, Mass.* (New York, 1970), both *passim*.
 18. Data for cultivated acreages are drawn from MHS MSS, "Valuations of the Several Counties ... in 1751"; MA MSS "Valuations of Towns" (1771); vol. 1, "Agriculture". These include subdivisions for tillage, pasture, and hay crop acreages. Livestock figures and usable flax and wool are also available from these sources as well as from over thirty farmers' account books at Baker Library Archives, Harvard (hereafter Baker). See also Bidwell, *History of Agriculture* and Robert Walcott, "Husbandry in Colonial New England", *New England Quarterly*, 9 (1936), pp. 218-52.
 19. Greven, *Four Generations*; Percy Bidwell, *The Rural Economy in New England* (Hartford, 1916).
 20. MHS MSS, "Valuations of ... Counties ... 1751"; MA MSS, "Valuations of Towns" (1771, 1801); *U.S. Federal Census* (1790; 1800). These sources indicate acres of cultivated land, and numbers of individual holdings. Production type and quantity are also available here.
 21. MHS MSS, "Government Census, 1754"; "Valuations ... 1751". The figure of 7.6 was quite uniform across all the counties (6.6 to 7.9) with the exception of the more

WORK AND SOCIAL STABILITY IN MASSACHUSETTS

eastern Massachusetts from 1750 to 1790, and included family adults and children ranging in age up to the mid- to late-teens and occasionally an older son or daughter. In many cases there was a resident apprentice, and in rarer instances a servant.²² Together, the family comprised a labour unit which in turn divided work specialities: the wife and daughters did spinning, gardening, and extensive household duties, for example, and the able male children assisted their fathers in field work and frequently "hired out" to neighbours.²³ The important point to be made here is that the subsistence farm itself could not provide all the necessities of life, because of its limited scale; and that scale was determined by the size of the normal provincial family. The local rural communities had no commercial enterprises large enough to provide convenient alternative wage employment.²⁴ Therefore, contrary to Jackson Turner Main's occupational profile of rural New England, in which he separated "farmers" from "artisans" and "labourers," subsistence farmers were also independent, self-employed blacksmiths, carpenters, weavers, tailors, shoemakers, or any of a great variety of other skilled and legally apprenticed occupations. Or, to further dissemble Main's categories, the rural artisan was usually also a subsistence farmer. Other farmers were carters, merchants, doctors, clergymen, mill operators, and labourers. Approximately one-half of all dual-occupation farmers were skilled craftsmen.²⁵ And all farmers were versatile, and willing to perform a variety of tasks.

There are no substantial data to show the precise extent of this multi-occupational model nor is there a complete record to show how much time on

sparingly settled Hampshire and York counties (10.3, 9.1). Daniel Scott Smith, "The Demographic History of Colonial New England", *Journal of Economic History*, 32 (1972), pp. 165-83. See also Josiah Benton, *Early Census Making in Massachusetts...* (Boston, 1905).

22. Baker MSS, "Account Books". Catalogued by name, occupation, and date. These provide valuable information on the work and residence habits of children. See also MHS Misc. Bd. MSS, "Depositions"; MA MSS, vol. 8, "Depositions"; vols. 244-54 "Accounts". Apprenticeship and servitude materials are available from the above and from Lawrence Towner, "A Good Master Well Served; A Social History of Servitude in Mass., 1620-1750", (Ph.D. thesis, Northwestern, 1955).
23. Baker MSS, "Account Books", especially those of "Anonymous Blacksmith", "Pearson Family", "John Reed", "Nathaniel Chamberlin". MHS MSS, "John Marshall Diary". Greven, *Four Generations*; Walcott, "Husbandry".
24. Stuart Bruchey, *The Roots of American Economic Growth, 1607-1860* (New York, 1965), pp. 16-65. V.S. Clark, *History of Manufactures in the United States, 1607-1860*, Bidwell, *Rural Economy*. A "large" milling, tanning, and woodcutting operation in rural Middlesex seldom employed more than eight "servants"; see Baker MSS, "Pearson Family Papers". A valuable source on this subject is MA MSS, vol. 59, "Manufactures".
25. MA MSS, vols. 91-9, "Muster Rolls"; Baker MSS, "Account Books"; Occupational data are also found in MA MSS, vols. 15B-19, "Estates"; and vols. 244-54, "Accounts". See also Bidwell's labour typology in *History of Agriculture*, pp. 115-33; and Henry Belknap, *Trades and Tradesmen of Essex County* (Salem, 1929).

average was devoted by this population either to farming or alternative occupation. However, sampling from selected areas in all rural Massachusetts reveals that not much more than 10 per cent of the population was engaged exclusively in commercial (i.e., full-time) agricultural enterprise. And a similar figure of roughly 10 per cent emerges for full-time artisans and other non-agricultural workers. A further 5 to 10 per cent of rural adult males (including non-taxables) were full-time mill owners, substantial retail merchants, fully retired elders, or lame, idle, or simply unemployed.²⁶ These figures did not prevail equally at all times and everywhere, of course. Higher than average population density and town size, age and site, for example, might encourage a higher percentage of full-time merchants and artisans in certain areas. Yet a unique feature of the settlement patterns and community structure of colonial Massachusetts was that over one-half of the province's 192 contiguous towns in 1765 had within one hundred residents of the provincial town population average of some 1,100. Most of the few substantially larger towns were coastal communities, the economies of which were not as pronouncedly agricultural as were the inland towns.²⁷

There was some variability in the amount of time the subsistence farmer devoted to either farm or non-farm work: family size and type (more able male children would mean less need for contracted farm help), soil conditions, farm topography and the tillage to "haying" to pasture and livestock ratios would also determine the amount of labour required to operate a farm. An extra five acres of cultivated land for edible crop tillage, flax, or hay made a difference of as much as thirty working days a year in farm operation. Crafts or labour proficiency, competition, and demand were also variable from individual to individual and from town to town so that, if a farmer-artisan could manage to contract (by barter) the labour for his farm work, he might devote as much as 80 per cent of his working life to his craft while remaining, essentially, a subsistence farmer. That ratio would be reversed for others, with regard to the same factors. Samples taken from various sources indicate that a majority of farmer-artisans, for example, split their working lives equally between farm work and crafts work. An outline drawn from these data shows an agrarian population of which some 65 to 75 per cent of taxable male adults were engaged simultaneously in both agricultural and other work, in varying degrees of emphasis. This cross occupational habit had been a feature of New England rural agricultural organization since the earliest settlement.²⁸

The social consequences of the rural work regime had far-reaching effects on local economies and communal relations. The principal commodities of this econ-

26. See note 25 above; and also MA MSS, vol. 7, "Commercial"; vols. 130-4, "Valuations of Towns"; and vol. 59, "Manufactures".

27. *Historical Data Relating to the Cities, Towns and Counties of Massachusetts* (Mass. Secy. of State, Boston, 1975). *Historical Statistics: Colonial Times to the Present* (Bureau of Census, Wash., 1961), Section Z. Boston Town Papers (hereafter BTP) MSS, vol. 7.

28. Baker MSS, "Account Books"; Bidwell, *History of Agriculture*; Eric Nellis, "Labor and Community in Massachusetts Bay, 1630-1660", *Labor History*, 18 (1977), pp. 525-44.

WORK AND SOCIAL STABILITY IN MASSACHUSETTS

omy were the edible grains and livestock, and their by-products, produced at the subsistence level, along with whatever natural resources could be extracted from non-cultivated property.²⁹ These, and the skills, labour, and produce of the part-time farmer's other work constituted the material assets of the rural worker. The self-contained local markets generated by a circulating system of labour and commodity exchange and barter created in Massachusetts a network of local and partially closed economies. The participants in these markets were at once independent and interdependent, in terms, respectively, of their *basic* self-sufficiency, property status, skills, and labour, and in their need to cooperate freely with others in the community. The latter was necessary to maximize material consumption and utilize excess time for non-farm work. Rural account books and diaries reveal an extraordinary intricacy of economic relations within communities, in the form of labour, service, and commodity barter and exchange (see Appendix 1). It was not unusual for a farmer-artisan to have reciprocal economic dealings with over thirty separate members of his community. When it is noted that in a year a rural worker had some three hundred working days to fill, and that only about one-half of those were necessary for the operation of the common subsistence farm (including "winter work"), it is not surprising to find widespread non-agricultural skills and functions among farmers. Furthermore, when it is remembered that the blacksmith-farmer required shoes, woven cloth, bricks, candles, furniture, and a host of other domestic and vocational materials, services, and labour help, it is easy to predict the numerical extent of his dealings with other workers.³⁰ It is the bonding effect of these work patterns that should be considered more thoroughly when the social character of late-colonial rural Massachusetts is being examined and discussed.

The durability of these many small market economies was another feature of their importance to the social history of this region. For example, some rural merchants, mill owners, and commercial farmers did function beyond the common labour and commodity barter and exchange relationships. But those assorted entrepreneurs did not and could not seriously influence the internal mechanisms of the simple local economies, and certainly not the economies of larger areas. In fact, the absence of specie, cash, large-scale capital funding of any kind, and any sort of province-wide market network for distribution of produced goods discouraged a concentration of commodity or labour control. The strength and persistence of the primacy of the family farm, and its concomitant goods and labour exchange demands, implies a formidable resistance to the development of a more sophisticated rural market economy.³¹

In his influential essay on farms and families, James Henretta notes that the rural "web of social relationships and cultural expectations ... inhibited the free-play of [external] market forces. Much of the [local] output ... was consumed

29. Baker MSS, "Account Books".

30. *Ibid.* For the range and complexity of these interpersonal transactions, see "John Reed Account Book, 1740-1769", a summary of which is attached to this essay as an appendix.

31. See note 24 above, especially Bruchey, *Roots*, pp. 60-3.

by residents, most of whom ... were not paid wages for their labor." There is much to agree with in this statement. However, in his apparent eagerness to refute the "modernist" thesis, Henretta creates an image of pre-industrial rural America that is more pastoral than it need be. The majority of Massachusetts farmers and rural artisans may not have used much cash or specie, but they were keenly *aware* of the value and meaning of money as exchange. Those who kept records always attached a "price" to their various commodity and labour bartering, and had since the founding of the colony. Nevertheless, an awareness of money, even as it might indicate a diminishing traditionalist mentality, does not make rural New Englanders acquisitive proto-capitalists. The latter is what the recent work of James Lemon seems to indicate. Lemon's comment that late colonial America produced "an emerging agrarian and commercial capitalism *paralleling* the English revolution of the seventeenth century" is quite misleading when the respective historical and environmental preconditions are compared. American agricultural historians who look to European examples in their search for agrarian capitalism in the middle and northern colonies would profit from a reading of Eric Hobsbawm's recent study of eighteenth-century "primitive accumulation" in Scottish agriculture. In any case, the major problem with Lemon and Henretta is that each attempts to squeeze at least three distinctive colonial American agricultural environments into a single analytical model.³² Yet despite the intangibles implicit in the *mentalité* concept, Henretta's model most closely fits rural Massachusetts. Residents there, even if they had an understanding of the "market," did not yet participate in a "market economy" beyond the simple mechanisms of the communal system.

The suggestion of capital accumulation in Massachusetts agriculture raises the question of commercial full-time farming—that is, operations which produced enough saleable surplus agricultural produce to fill all the economic needs of the proprietor, including the ability to make "profits" and employ full-time or seasonal "servants." An increase in this sector inevitably would have led to a measurable decline in the numbers and proportion of subsistence farms, especially in eastern Massachusetts where *new* land suitable for farming was in very short supply. The towns of eastern Massachusetts traditionally had contained a higher than average number of commercial farm operations largely because of the proximity of the Boston market. There and elsewhere in the region, where transportation to outside markets was feasible, such as the Hampshire towns in the Connecticut River Valley, or towns near the Essex county coast, some commercial farming did flourish. But apart from a steady export of livestock produce and some flax, nothing resembling a cash-generating agricultural economy developed during the

32. James Henretta, "Families and Farms: *Mentalité* in pre-Industrial America", *WMQ*, 35 (1978), p. 19. This article represents a change of thesis for Henretta, from that put forth in *Evolution*. James Lemon, "Early Americans and their Social Environment", *Journal of Historical Geography*, 6 (1980), pp. 115-31 (quote from p. 131, emphasis added). Eric Hobsbawm, "Capitalisme et agriculture: les réformateurs écossais aux XVIII^e siècle", *Annales*, (Summer 1979). See also the "Communication" between Lemon and Henretta in *WMQ*, 37 (1980), pp. 688-700.

WORK AND SOCIAL STABILITY IN MASSACHUSETTS

provincial period. As yet, there is no satisfactory evidence to show that commercial farming was on the increase, at the expense of subsistence agriculture. And while bloc land acquisition and speculation was an increasingly important factor in New England settlement patterns, it usually occurred in underpopulated areas on the fringes of Massachusetts: in the west, and in New Hampshire and York county.

In the older areas of the province, the curbs on commercial farming and land speculation can be explained in part by the limitations of the climate and soil conditions of Massachusetts. An equally important reason was the survival of traditional habits of family property inheritance and land distribution and use. On the eve of the Revolution, 50 per cent of the Massachusetts population and 40 per cent of its towns lay within a twenty-five mile radius of Boston. A brief outline of the agricultural structure of one of those towns is revealing. In Roxbury, which was adjacent to Boston, 92 per cent of all household heads had deed or lease title to at least one acre of land in agricultural use in 1727. That figure declined to 85 per cent by 1767. Throughout this period, about 20 per cent of all landholders worked less than ten acres. In 1727, the average holding of agricultural land was twenty-three acres and about 60 per cent of landholders worked between twenty and sixty acres for an average of thirty-four acres. Those *acreage* figures declined by about 11 per cent by 1767, but the percentage of landholders in that acreage range remained constant. Roxbury's population increased by over 32 per cent to about 1,500 between 1727 and 1767. During this time, only one holding exceeded one hundred acres (108) of land in agricultural use and only 6 per cent of all holdings were over sixty acres in size and capable of producing a regular marketable agricultural surplus of sufficient quantity to be called "commercial." Of all land in agricultural use on the nearly three hundred farms in late colonial Roxbury, only 10 per cent was devoted to tillage (an average of 2.2 acres per farm). The largest single tillage component found in the Roxbury records was fourteen acres and edible grains yielded between ten and fifteen bushels per acre. Slightly more than 40 per cent of agricultural land was in "rough" pasture at the rate of about three acres per livestock animal. The rest of the land was used for hay (28 per cent), orchard, and gardens, and some land was usually unused.³³ The constraints of this land use pattern encouraged the cross-occupational habits of Massachusetts farmers. The outcome of those habits also affected the style of farm operations and was partly responsible for the technological and organizational conservatism of the subsistence farm family and the primitive nature of Revolutionary-era farming practices. General Warren's remarks on New England crop tillage, made in 1787, are worth quoting: "... one miserable team, a paltry plow and every-

33. MHS MSS, "Roxbury Valuation ... 1727" (extrapolations were made from 135 of 273 polls); MA MSS, vol. 130, "Valuations of Towns, 1767" (Roxbury). On population figures and town provenances, see notes 20, 21, and 27 above; and Lester Cappon, editor in chief, *Atlas of Early American History: The Revolutionary Era* (Princeton, 1976). On commercial farming operations, see the valuable "Joseph Andrews Journal" in MHS MSS. Of special note is the fact that in Roxbury "real estate" value averaged about 60 per cent of the value of "personal estate".

thing in the same proportion; three acres of Indian corn ... as many acres of half-starved English grain ... and a small yard of turnips complete the tillage, and the whole is conducted perhaps by a man and a boy and performed in half their time."³⁴

The social consequences of this economic model and its labour variable suggest a *necessary* economic cohesion in the rural communities. There is no doubt that the process of historical change had affected the status, behaviour, and perceptions of members of this society. Men were aware that a diminished land base was affecting and might reform their status, habits, and values. This critical factor, and its suggestion of increased economic disparity, may indeed have been intruding upon the more tranquil and equable society depicted above. But at what rate and to what extent? The "crowding" theses and hints of "modernism" and "unstable pluralism" may have application in late provincial Massachusetts, but not on the scale suggested by the neo-Malthusianism of some historians. In other words, older and traditional economic and social arrangements and relationships, though modified and changing, were still dominant. Economic growth was slight and afforded more reason for a perpetuation of the traditional work and social ethos than for a radical realignment of it. It is axiomatic that Massachusetts rural society had been evolving since the establishment of the colony; it would continue to evolve and transform itself into the nineteenth century. There is no convincing evidence, however, that at some point in the eighteenth century—after 1720, for example, or 1760, or even during the Revolution—that this agrarian society underwent a rapid, or sudden, or even cumulative breakdown. At least not of the order, or with the consequences, advanced by the "crisis" historians.

Pre-Revolutionary Massachusetts was not a monoculture, and even a generalized review of rural society still leaves the question of Boston's important social and economic status to be considered. The town of Boston stood in distinct contrast to the socio-economic symmetry of Massachusetts agricultural towns. Apart from a tenuous comparison with a handful of coastal towns, chief among them Salem, which developed mixed economies of farming, maritime industry, and some manufacturing (thus tending to "specialize" work functions), Boston was quite unique in the province's social landscape. On reflection, the student of colonial New England understands this rather obvious distinction, but it is worth reminding ourselves that the town of Boston usually contained less than 10 per cent of the province's population. Yet it is often the subject of an extensive historiographical attention that belies the town's importance to the overall culture of colonial New England.³⁵ To be sure, Boston was the seat of senior government and the locus of an imperial bureaucracy. It was also the great commercial and trade hub of the region and the home, by and large, of the province's leading jurists, clergymen, lawyers, intellectuals, professionals, and merchants. Thus, it was in Boston

34. General Warren, *American Museum*, II (1787), no. 2, p. 347.

35. Lemuel Shattuck, *Report to the Committee of the City Council ... 1845* (Boston, 1846), esp. pp. 2-165. Shattuck was Boston's first great demographer and his *Report* is a mine of colonial population data, including "vital statistics".

WORK AND SOCIAL STABILITY IN MASSACHUSETTS

that the important *political* events and actions of Revolutionary dissent were manifested and it is to Boston that political and economic historians turn when they seek an understanding of the direction and ideology of Revolutionary political and economic activity. This is a fair practice, so far as it concerns politicians and merchants but, when social historians examine Boston, they sometimes do so with a preconception that Boston's social conditions had wider political implications. Furthermore, while it is acknowledged that Boston did have a special and influential role in the history of colonial America, it should not be seen as a representative crucible of social change—especially when the social change is linked to political innovation. In his recent and impressive monograph, Gary Nash has taken social history and social change directly into the matrix of the American Revolution. Not only does he find “class consciousness” in eighteenth-century Boston, but the running title of his book reveals the current effects of the “crisis” historians’ conceptual framework: “Social Change, Political Consciousness and the Origins of the American Revolution.” One need not accept the view that Boston was the “cutting edge of ... change” given the distinctiveness of rural Massachusetts and its inherent resistance to change. In Boston itself, as in any mature early modern seaport, society certainly was not static, but it does not follow that one must accept fully the kind of change, nor its rate and meaning, that Nash has described.³⁶ By describing how work, workers, and the labour economy were reflected in the social order, it is possible to re-evaluate the social configuration of Boston.

That question was posed of the rural community and, while the Boston labour economy differed sharply in detail from that of rural society, the same thematic correlation between work and social stability may still be established. In the first place, to repeat, there has been a serious omission by some important social historians regarding Boston. Too often, the socio-economic status and behaviour of the great majority of Boston's adult population is ignored or described in the most perfunctory terms. That majority is often shunted to the side while Boston's “poor” are examined microscopically, or the mechanics of mercantilism and economic-political elitism are studied. This has led to a description of Boston as a bi-polar society with a population made up of the moderate to extreme poor and a contrasting small group which enjoyed an increasing concentration of wealth and influence.³⁷ If, however, closer attention is given to Boston's largest plurality, indeed its majority, a more integrated and gradualized structure can be drawn. If the rural forms and habits of work helped define the nature of “community” in agrarian Massachusetts, then it is suggested that the economy and its work component can also demonstrate a social profile for Boston.

Here, it is necessary to clarify some aspects of Boston's economic health in the second half of the eighteenth century. It has been argued, quite reasonably,

36. Nash, *Urban Crucible*, p. viii.

37. G. B. Warden, “Inequality and Instability in Eighteenth Century Boston, A Reappraisal”, *Journal of Social History*, 6 (1976), pp. 585-620. Warden discusses the influential “crisis” interpretations of Henretta and Kulikoff and brings his own exhaustive property data to bear on the issue.

that Boston's population and economic growth peaked and then ceased in the 1740s. Certainly, from a variety of reliable contemporary sources, it can be shown that Boston's population increased from 6,700 in 1700 to 16,382 in 1742 and declined to 15,734 in 1750 and remained within four hundred of that figure until some time around 1800. Moreover, the leading sources and indices of economic activity indicate a flattening of the town's economic growth in mid-century, punctuated by a series of short-lived recessions.³⁸ For example, for a period after 1747, following a war-time boom, there was a stated pessimism by the town's leading merchants and politicians that the Boston economy was not as prosperous as it had been.³⁹ This cessation of growth, the series of recessions, and the lamentations of selected merchants is fuel for the historian of social regression. So, too, is the hint of the development of a "disease environment" culminating in the lethal and disruptive smallpox epidemic of 1751. Although this outbreak was no more disastrous than earlier epidemics in 1722 and 1730, the 1751 event was compounded by economic recession and resulted in a temporary breakdown of the entire Boston economy, including removal of the General Court to Concord.⁴⁰ Other examples of the destabilization of Boston society apparently can be found in the construction and operation of various orphans and paupers facilities from 1730 on.⁴¹ It seems plausible, therefore, that there is some historical reason to look for socio-economic change and institutional restructuring in eighteenth-century Boston. If theories of rising "inequalities," reduced opportunities, and assorted other hardships are considered, and the protests of the Boston merchant community are heeded, then social historians may indeed agree with Gary Nash that the Boston social climate was a wintry one.

But viewed from another perspective, all those factors might be reappraised and their meanings modified. For example, does a cessation in growth really imply decline? Boston expanded to the maximum size its function as a regional and imperial entrepôt required. As the rural population of Massachusetts grew, it serviced most of its own increased commodity and other economic needs locally. The economy of Boston "settled" after a long period of uninterrupted growth and there is no reason to suppose that its major economic enterprises declined, but rather that they stabilized. In fact, the resiliency of the town's population, and economy, can be seen in the speed in which normal conditions were restored within

-
38. Shattuck, *Report*. On p. 6, Shattuck notes that the number of rateable polls was nearly constant between 1735 and 1765. The Records of the Overseers of the Poor, BTP MSS, vol. 1-7, *passim*, show fluctuations in the numbers of "poor", but no sustained rise. Josiah Benton, *Early Census*.
39. *Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston* (hereafter *BCR*), vol. 14, pp. 220 ff.
40. On the "meaning" of "disease environment", see Henretta, *Evolution*. For the historical record, see Shattuck, *Report*, pp. 71-2, 126-33; *BCR*, vol. 8, pp. 154-67; vol. 13, pp. 81-2, 308; vol. 14, pp. 221, 238. MHS Misc. Bd. MSS for 24 July 1752; MHS *Collections*, second series, vol. 3, pp. 95 ff. *Journal of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts* (hereafter *JHR*), vol. 29, p. vii.
41. See note 10; and *BCR*, vol. 8, p. 148; vol. 13, p. 80; vol. 14, pp. 234-5. *Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of Massachusetts* (hereafter *AR*), 3, pp. 680-2; *JHR*, 30, pp. 38-89.

WORK AND SOCIAL STABILITY IN MASSACHUSETTS

weeks of the end of the 1751 smallpox epidemic. Boston's merchants, from the wealthy and influential "gentlemen" to the entrepreneurial master artisans to the scores of small retailers and distributors, stopped issuing apocalyptic warnings when the post-1747 recession ended in about 1754.⁴² In terms of the "growth of inequality" and the institutional rationalization of increased "out of home" poverty, the Orphan's Home of 1730 appears to have floundered from a lack of need. The Almshouse achieved a stable population in the late 1730s and did not expand thereafter. The Workhouse functioned as a token, but relatively unimportant institution of social control; it was underused for most of the 1750s and 1760s.⁴³ The linen Manufacturing Scheme was perhaps the most ambitious single industrial enterprise in colonial Boston's history. It was designed to attract a large, unskilled, wage labour force drawn from Boston's poor and was funded privately by the town's leading merchants. As an example of a philanthropic, but profit-making venture, it is singularly important in what it reveals of economics, labour, and poverty in Boston. It collapsed, at considerable financial loss to its backers, because it could not penetrate the local linen markets of rural Massachusetts, and it could not sustain production levels for the small market it did have, because it could not find or hold a permanent or continuous work force of unskilled, unemployed or working poor wage labour.⁴⁴ While none of this "proves" social and economic continuity, it should caution against too easy use of categorical deterioration.

A closer look at the prevailing labour economy of Boston will demonstrate more clearly the absence of other dysfunctional factors. Certainly, in comparison with the labour typology of rural Massachusetts, workers in Boston were conspicuously different in the application of their labour and skills. Nevertheless, the balance of occupational independence and economic interdependence was comparable in both settings. Similar, too, was the Boston worker's family economic unit and property base, even if the property was a tenement apartment or house, rather than a farm acreage. In any case, the Boston worker's relations with his community were as close as were those of the rural worker. The former possessed

-
42. *BCR*, vols. 8, 13, 14 (for 1740s-50s). The flood of business petitions to the Town Meeting and General Court, mostly seeking tax relief, rose and fell with every economic fluctuation. The concern of these petitions and "Reports" with social matters was never higher than in the 1715 to 1735 period when colonial Boston underwent its highest rate of population growth.
 43. A perceptive study of the treatment of orphans, and why their numbers were relatively small, is found in Lawrence Towner, "The Indentures of Boston's Poor Apprentices, 1734-1805", *Col. Soc. of Mass., Transactions*, (1954) pp. 417-68. On the Orphan House, see *BCR*, vol. 15, p. 369. Also, on the Almshouse, vols. 7, 13, 15, 17 (indexed); and on the Workhouse, see *BCR*, vol. 15, pp. 27, 30, 38, 66, 189.
 44. The available data on the entire "Linen Manufacturing Scheme" is abundant and in many aspects complete. See, for example, MHS MSS, "Ezekiel Price Papers", sheets 141-322; "Articles of the Society", July 1754 in *Evans Catalogue*; Sermons of Thomas Barnard, Charles Chauncy, and Samuel Cooper, indexed, at MHS; the indexes of MA, vol. 59; and *JHR*, vols. 36, 41, 42, 44. See also Eric Nellis, "Linen Manufacturing and the Economics of Poverty in Eighteenth Century Massachusetts" (Unpublished, typescript).

no means of security other than his skills and the consistency of the Boston economy. As such, he was a specialist, not only confining himself to one occupational talent, but refining that talent to suit the requirements of the complex Boston commercial economy.

That economy can be seen as an integrated whole, with two major interrelated sectors: first, an import-export raw materials and manufactured commodity economy, with ties to maritime trade and to some agricultural and resource produce of rural Massachusetts. This sector would include shipbuilding and its many ancillary businesses, and the processing, storage, and shipping of some exportable materials such as rum, leather, and cooperage. The second main component of the Boston economy was the purely local and domestic market which provided the material and service needs of a relatively large and concentrated population. This involved, naturally, a crafts-retail economy in everything from blacksmithing and tailoring, to baking, brewing, and butchering, to house and furnishings construction and manufacture. Running parallel to the "private" sector was a public works and administration economy of considerable size and scope.⁴⁵ In all of this, there was a remarkable preponderance of skilled artisans, crafts-retailers, and merchants. Occupational statistics compiled for Boston in the 1750s and again in 1790, show that fully 80 per cent of Boston's adult, white, male population can be classified as independent skilled or specialist workers.⁴⁶ The most important quality of the specialized and skilled Boston worker was that he contracted for his skills, services, or product, rather than engage in an employer-employee relationship.⁴⁷

The absence of a large and fixed body of unskilled workers can be explained by observing some basic operational features of Boston's economy. The eighteenth-century craftsman did most of his own preparatory work and subsidiary labour, and only occasionally required the services of a labourer-servant. Often he was served only by a *bona-fide* apprentice. The multi-faceted nature of the Boston economy meant that many small competing elements existed in place of any large labour-intensive enterprises. For example, the largest "mass" employment of men in the Boston economy occurred in the construction of a one hundred to three hundred ton ship. As many as two hundred workers would be engaged in this single activity, but virtually all of them would be independent specialist artisans or suppliers who had subcontracted portions of the construction from the master builder.⁴⁸ Here, as elsewhere, there was little need in the Boston economy for unskilled labour. And what need there was, mostly in public works, on the docks

45. BTP MSS, vols. 1-7, *passim*. A partial index is available.

46. BTP MSS, vol. 7, p. 24; *BCR*, vol. 19, p. 171 ff; vol. 15, p. 369; MA MSS, vol. 94, pp. 167-557; vol. 134; Shattuck, *Report*. Between 1742 and 1790, the number of adult white males in Boston varied from 2,700 to 2,900 comprising approximately 1,700 "households".

47. For example, see BTP MSS, vols. 1-7, *passim*; MHS MSS, "Joseph Belknap Ledger"; MA MSS, vol. 7; Baker MSS, V.S. Clark notes, box 2.

48. See MHS Misc. Bd. MSS, October 1695, "Articles of Agreement"; February 1759 "Wentworth Letter"; MA MSS, vol. 117, "Hallowell Report".

WORK AND SOCIAL STABILITY IN MASSACHUSETTS

and irregularly in other areas of the economy, was filled by a small pool of free blacks, “mariners” who were ashore between voyages, and others who were passing through the Boston economy. There is no concrete evidence, from the 1750 to 1775 period, of a large, resident, and persistent number of either labourers or working poor.⁴⁹ The long standing practice of “warning out” was an effective way of limiting the duration of residence of unnecessary unskilled and potentially unemployable males; and there is evidence of increased vigilance during economically depressed periods.⁵⁰ The absence of a fixed body of unskilled working poor and the control of transiency has some significance for students of colonial social history. While historians continue to cite the formation of a lower class as an indication of a break in the social cohesion of colonial American seaports, there seems less than adequate proof of this for Boston.

The Boston economy was above all a cash economy. In it, men exchanged their skills, services, and labour for money or credit, but it was not yet a wage economy.⁵¹ While there was a distinct gradation of wealth and influence, the integrated nature and relative compactness of the business and labour economy made that gradation less disparate than has been suggested in some studies. There is enough evidence to show that opportunities existed for upward mobility—as well as for failure.⁵² Workers at least retained the independent use and application of their labour and produce, and to the end of the colonial period there did not appear an exploited or exploitable “class” of workers in Boston.

There was little or no business or technological innovation. And this should be seen as stable persistence rather than stagnation or regression. Social arrangements, in line with work habits, showed more consistency than change throughout the thirty years prior to the Revolution. The average household size in Boston, large as it was—between nine and ten persons per household—remained constant between 1742 and 1765.⁵³ Leisure, play, or idleness was as infrequent in Boston as in the rural towns, and was frowned upon equally in both settings.⁵⁴ Work and its expected reward was the principal and most commonly shared social characteristic of this population, and included the women and children of the house-

49. BTP MSS, vols. 2-4 on numbers and backgrounds of unskilled. Lawrence Towner, “The Indentures of Boston’s Poor Apprentices”.

50. Josiah Benton, *Warning Out in New England, 1656-1817* (Boston, 1911); BTP MSS, vol. 7, p. 73.

51. This should be compared to the one-half to two-thirds of all English workers who were “dependent wage earners” in the eighteenth century: Macpherson, *Possessive Individualism*, p. 61

52. See, for example, the extensive biographies and genealogies that can be reconstructed with occupational sequence from *Thwing Catalogue* at MHS.

53. Shattuck, *Report*; Benton, *Early Census*.

54. No useful study of leisure in colonial New England exists. The various personal records used in this essay indicate a minimum of “play” or “idle” time among workers. See, for example, MHS MSS, “John Marshall Diary”; and Baker MSS, “Cockerel Reeves Account Book”. Contrast with Keith Thomas, “Work and Leisure in Pre-Industrial Society”, *Past and Present*, 29 (1964), pp. 50-66.

hold economic unit throughout Massachusetts society. By the latter part of the eighteenth century, there is no doubt that individual economic self-interest was a fully realized development of Puritan society.⁵⁵ But its extremes were curbed by the limitations of the Boston and Massachusetts economic and social environment which, it is argued, had not yet reached a mature level of economic pluralism. Hence, individual interest still merged with wider communal relationships.

If this is true, one will look in vain for an impoverished peasantry in the pre-Revolutionary Massachusetts countryside. In areas where farm acreages were shrinking and landlessness was occurring, and expectations presumably declining, other explanations must be sought for the remarkable amount of residential persistence of sons who might have gone elsewhere in New England for land.⁵⁶ Habits eventually become customs, and scholars might profit by studying more closely the work habits and interrelationships of colonial subsistence farmers. Did those relationships contain a measure of traditionalism that might have delayed or modified the process of "modernization" in late colonial and early Federal New England? There is a tantalizing possibility that Massachusetts was more "traditionally agrarian" in the early nineteenth century than it had been a century earlier.⁵⁷ In Boston, the "mob" from the Stamp Act Crisis to the Tea Protests may indeed have been composed of small merchants, artisans, and the unskilled and unemployed men of the town but, rather than view these men as economically frustrated American *bourgeoisie* and *sans culottes*, one should heed Pauline Maier's analysis of them as political conservatives "defending" local political institutions and practices.⁵⁸ Certainly, *as workers*, the workers of Boston had little to gain from a major disruption or realignment of the town's internal economy.

Nevertheless, the stimulating and thorny questions of the direction, rate, and meaning of any social change in late colonial New England remain important historiographical problems. So, too, whether in the case of an event such as the Revolution or in a broader context of American culture, the current primacy of social history will continue to determine the concepts and expectations that colonial historians bring to their studies. The observations and suggestions outlined in this paper do not attempt to deny the existence of social change in pre-Revolutionary Massachusetts, but rather call for a re-evaluation of the extent and significance of that change. To do so will require the adoption of broader perspectives, including the case made here for a more serious consideration of work—and *not* "labour history"—as it embraces or is linked to the larger cluster of social issues and conditions.

55. The best single example of its seventeenth-century origins is Bernard Bailyn, "The *Apolo-gia* of Robert Keayne", *WMQ*, 7 (1950), pp. 568-77. See also J.E. Crowley, *This Sheba Self...* (Baltimore, 1974).

56. Greven, *Four Generations*, provides a good starting point.

57. Apart from the statistical evidence for this (see note 20 above), there are novel suggestions contained in Joseph S. Wood, "The Origin of the New England Village", (Ph.D. thesis, Penn. State, 1978) .

58. Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution...* (New York, 1972).

WORK AND SOCIAL STABILITY IN MASSACHUSETTS

Appendix 1 *Account Sample*

The following samples are taken from the "John Reed Account Book, 1740-69" (Baker, MSS 641 R 324) and are intended to illustrate the extensiveness of the barter system in rural towns. Reed was a shoemaker-farmer in Weymouth in coastal southern Suffolk county, about twelve miles from Boston. His example is quite typical of other artisans practising other crafts and trades in other parts of Massachusetts throughout the 1690-1765 period. Reed's farm was close to the average provincial size and contained twenty acres of combined tillage, cultivated grass, pasture, and orchard.

The first list deals with the variety of goods which Reed received for shoe manufacture and repair. It involves some thirty separate customers for the twelve months following February 1742/3. All entries have attached monetary values, but none are given here; little money changed hands and the purpose here is to denote the varieties of exchange and not "income". Amongst the items Reed received as credit were hides, milk, rye, calf-skins, a pound of fat, cash, turnips, flax, honey, meat, earthenware, an almanac, dry fish, two pigs, wool, salt, hay, molasses, oil, plums, biscuits, cider, casks, and fish. Reed built (or had built) a house in 1742-43, and he received the following construction materials in barter: posts, clay, rails, one thousand shingles, one thousand bricks, pavements, lime, clapboards, and planks. For his shop, Reed received from local suppliers, in barter, four dozen heels, a side of cured leather, and tacks. Reed received the following farm and related labour: from a client's slave, Sambo: splitting rails, plowing, driving plow for two acres, and sliding six loads of wood; from a client's white servant: carting hides to Braintree, a day's work planting, one day thatching a barn, a day's work hoeing, and mortising eight posts; and from customers themselves, Reed received carting dung and hay, helping in carrying hay, carting corn, carting stones, gathering corn and picking apples, hoeing, mowing, and butchering. For the construction of his dwelling, Reed credited a mason with chimney work, laying paths, plastering, making mortar, underpinning, and "you and Nathaniel's work". From a blacksmith he received axe sharpening, a hoe, and a spindle. From a tailor he obtained a frock, doublet, jacket and britches, and also "driving my plow" and "your wife for work". He also had a deed written and "borrowed horses". Each commodity and work assignment had a monetary value given to it, though less than 10 per cent of all dealings concluded with a money settlement.

Reed balanced most of these services and goods with shoemaking.

The following is a debit and credit account of John Reed's dealings with John Porter who was a carter, farmer, weaver, and general handyman. The two conducted similar transactions from about 1751 until 1775. The account was usually balanced monthly.

It can be seen that both men exchanged certain specialities: Reed his craft and Porter his labour and his ability to cart, make cider, and weave. These kinds of relationships were repeated several times between Reed and others and between Porter and others. Of special note is the occasional exchange of labour between

HISTORICAL PAPERS 1981 COMMUNICATIONS HISTORIQUES

the two men and their families; this was done often to balance any disparity in the monetary value in the accounts. In most years no money changed hands between the two men, but it is important to remember that every single transaction had a monetary *value* associated with it.

DEBIT (Reed to Porter)

1763: milk, barley, and eight pairs of shoes for Porter, his wife and two others.

1764: "Two hands [Reed and his son] one-half day's planting", "three-quarters of leather for Ben" (a creditor of Porter's), "work at your cave [quarry]", *eighteen* entries for shoes or repairs.

1765: "*five and one-half* pounds of veal", "helped unload boat [hay cart] and stack hay", "barley" "400 [?] of salt hay", *fourteen* entries for shoes and repairs.

1766 to 1769: a total of *sixty-one* shoes and shoe-repair transactions and nothing else

CREDIT (Porter to Reed)

1763: *nine* entries for cartage (hay, dung, stones, grain), making six barrels of cider, cash, "dressing my hogs", "weaving fifteen yards", "for Solomon (a son) one-half day's mowing".

1764: *twelve* entries for cartage (dung, stones, rye, lime, boards), "reaping", "killing beef", "dressing hogs", "making four barrels of cider".

1765: *nine* entries for cartage, "par-snips", "mowing and raking for one-half day", "dressing a calf", "twenty-one barrels cider".

1766 to 1769: *fifteen* entries for cartage. In 1767, "weaving thirty-eight yards of cloth". In 1768, fifty yards. And throughout, occasional work (as above) in the fields, butchering, and cider supply.
